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ABSTRACT

Students' evaluations of a lesson were made on the same videotaped lesson after students were informed that the lesson was difficult or that it was easy, and after they were given a hard or easy content test. A two-way factorial design was employed with 92 undergraduate students, who were randomly assigned to conditions. After all students listened to a 10-minute lesson of an abstract relational concept, half were briefly told that the concept was used for training professional mathematicians, and half that it was used to teach math in the primary grades. In a completely crossed design, half took a difficult objective test over the content, and half took an easier version of the same test. Immediately afterwards, all filled out a 10-item teaching evaluation on the lesson. The findings suggest that students tend to give lower evaluations to teachers who give easy tests. (Author/SW)

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Teaching Evaluations: Influence of Test Difficulty and Perceived Difficulty of Subject Matter

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Running head: Teaching Evaluations

Abstract

This was a two-way factorial design in which 92 undergraduate students (42 male, 50 female) were randomly assigned to conditions. All listened to a 10 min lesson on an abstract relational concept. Afterwards, half were briefly told that the concept was used for training professional mathematicians, and half that it was used to teach math in the primary grades. In a completely crossed design, half took a difficult objective test over the content, and half took an easier version of the same test. Immediately afterwards, all filled out a 10-item teaching evaluation on the lesson. The mean teaching evaluations scores were 27.22 (*SD* = 4.41) for the hard test condition and 24.97 (*SD* = 5.52) for the easy test condition. This difference is significant, F (1,88) = 4.64, $p < .05$. The mean for the condition in which the lesson was characterized as difficult, 25.33 (*SD* = 4.91), did not differ significantly from the condition in which it was characterized as easy, 26.78 (*SD* = 5.24). There was no significant interaction. These findings, obtained by experimental manipulation, suggest that students tend to give lower evaluations to teachers who give easy tests.

In the research literature on teaching evaluations, little attention has been given to the possible influences of the difficulty of course content or the difficulty of tests over such content (see Aubrecht, 1979; Feldman, 1978; Pohlmann, 1976). A notable exception is Marsh's recent counterintuitive finding that students may give lower evaluations in easy courses than in difficult ones (Marsh, 1980). The present paper reports a small investigation of teaching evaluations made on the same videotaped lesson after students were informed that the lesson was difficult or that it was easy, and after they were given a hard or easy test over the content.

Method

This was a two-way factorial design in which 92 undergraduate students (42 male, 50 female) in education and psychology courses were randomly assigned to conditions. All listened to a 10 min lesson on an abstract relational concept. Afterwards, half were briefly told that the concept was used to teach math in the primary grades. In a completely crossed design, half took a difficult objective test over the content, and half took an easier version of the same test. Immediately afterwards, all filled out a 10-item teaching evaluation on the lesson (Smith & Land, 1980).

Results

The mean teaching evaluations scores were 27.22 (SD = 4.41) for the hard test condition and 24.97 (SD = 5.52) for the easy test condition. This difference is significant, F (1,88) = 4.64, p < .05. The mean for the condition in which the lesson was characterized as difficult, 25.33

(SD = 4.91), did not differ significantly from the condition in which it was characterized as easy, 26.78 (SD = 5.24). There was no significant interaction.

Discussion

These findings, obtained by experimental manipulation, support Marsh's (1980) results obtained from analyses of classroom data. The present findings suggest in particular that, other things being equal, students tend to give lower evaluations to teachers who give easy tests. Such a suggestion would also seem pertinent in interpreting reported correlations between teaching evaluations and measures of student achievement (Aubrecht, 1979; Feldman, 1978). Specifically, studies that have correlated evaluations with grades (which are based in part on tests) have frequently been unable to control for the fact that different teachers give different tests, some easy and some difficult. If the findings of this study can be generalized to classroom settings, they may imply that positive correlations are indeed due to the students' gains in knowledge, and that easy exams may actually attenuate such correlations.

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